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ABSTRACT

This brief document provides information about the nationwide reading initiative, Reading First, in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Reading First is a focused effort to improve reading skills of students in kindergarten through third grade. First, information is provided on unique characteristics of the Reading First program and requirements concerning state applications for Reading First funds, state use of funds, and program evaluation and reporting requirements. Next, key components of state initiatives are described. These include a state level reading leadership team, use of scientifically based reading research, high quality professional development, use of valid and reliable assessments, use of reading programs with a coherent design in accord with scientifically based reading research, and accountability. Also considered is the role of state departments of education. The efforts of one state, Pennsylvania, are highlighted and include the involvement of special education personnel. Finally, the Early Reading First program, aimed at preschool children from low income families, is briefly described. (Contains 12 references.) (DB)

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Quick Turn Around

Project FORUM

QTA – A brief analysis of a critical issue in special education

Reading First Programs: An Overview

May 2002

Kim Mohererk Sopko

Introduction

Educators, parents, and national leaders recognize that the limited reading skills of many children across our nation is a critical issue that must be addressed. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) indicates that approximately 40 percent of students cannot read at a basic level. When considering subgroups of students, almost 70 percent of low-income fourth grade students and almost 50 percent of students living in urban areas cannot read at a basic level. Performance trends over a 10-year period show no progress for average-performing readers and less progress for the lowest-performing readers (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

Poor reading skills are a nationwide problem that affects special education because reading difficulties are a manifestation of many types of disabilities. It is widely believed that many children are found eligible for special education services due to their lack of reading skills. Special education providers must share the responsibility for improved reading skills in all students. Therefore, it is essential for special education providers to participate in nationwide initiatives to improve reading instruction, intervention and achievement.

This document provides information about the new nationwide reading initiatives in the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*. The document was developed as part of the work of Project FORUM at the National Association of State Directors of Special Education through its Cooperative Agreement with the U.S. Department of Education (ED) Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP).

The initiative, ***Reading First***, is a focused effort to improve reading skills of students in kindergarten through third grade. This document synthesizes information shared at ED's Reading Research Symposium for the Council of Great City Schools in March 2002 and on ED's Reading First website.[1] This information was also shared by the Secretary of ED at three other Reading Leadership Academies in January and February 2002. Information presented at the Reading Research Symposium and Reading Leadership Academies included an overview of the Reading First program, the law and guidance documents and research evidence on professional development, effective reading instruction, effective reading programs, accountability and instructional leadership. Selected abstracts of reading research studies were also shared and are available on the Reading First website.

The Reading First Initiative

Reading First is authorized under Title I, Part B, Subpart 1 of the *No Child Left*

[1] http://www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/readingfirst

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Behind Act of 2001 as a new nationwide effort to improve reading skills of students in kindergarten through grade three. In contrast to other national reading programs, Reading First—

- has a strong focus on classroom instruction supported by scientifically based reading research;
- provides a larger amount of funding ($900 million for FY 2002);
- offers opportunity for every state[2] to receive funds; and
- allows 20 percent of funds to be used for state-level activities, with the remainder awarded to local education agencies (LEAs).

Awards

States must apply for Reading First funds, which will be awarded for a six-year period, subject to sufficient appropriations and state submission of an annual implementation report and third year progress report. The funds will be distributed to states with approved applications according to a formula based on the proportion of children ages 5-17 years living below poverty level in that state compared to such children who reside in all states. Application packages became available on April 2, 2002, with a submission deadline of May 29, 2002 to receive funds on July 1, 2002. States may continue to apply up to July 1, 2003 and funds will be awarded on a rolling basis through rounds of expert panel review.

In addition to the basic grant, targeted assistance funds will be competitively available in FY 2004 for states that show an increased percentage of third grade students reading at proficiency level for two consecutive years and improvement in reading skills in grades 1-3 for the same two consecutive years.

State Use of Funds

States are required to award 80 percent of Reading First funds to LEAs on a competitive basis with priority to LEAs with 15 percent or at least 6,500 students living below poverty level. States are responsible for ensuring LEAs use scientifically based reading instruction and programs.

States are permitted to use up to 20 percent of the Reading First funds for state level activities:

- Up to 65 percent may be used for professional development programs that focus on essential components of reading instruction for K-3 teachers and K-12 special education teachers, pre-service courses for future K-3 teachers, and/or improvement of state licensure and certification standards.

- Up to 25 percent may be used for technical assistance to LEAs and expanded opportunities for K-3 students.

- Up to 10 percent may be used for planning, administering subgrants, evaluating effectiveness and meeting reporting requirements.

Program Evaluation and Reporting

States must evaluate LEA progress in meeting Reading First goals and states are encouraged to use an entity that conducts scientifically based reading research and evaluations to determine an LEA's progress. States must provide annual implementation reports that include achievement gains and program effectiveness and provide a mid-point progress report at the end of the third

[2] The Federated States of Micronesia, Republic of Marshall Islands and Palau are not eligible.

year of funding. States must also participate in the national evaluation activities of the Reading First program. An independent external organization will conduct a five-year quantitative evaluation of the Reading First program, will provide findings on a periodic basis and, among other factors, will specifically examine the impact of the Reading First program on students' referral to, and eligibility for, special education services.

Key Components of State Initiatives

Reading Leadership Team

States must assemble a Reading Leadership Team to coordinate and assist with the development, oversight and evaluation of the state's Reading First program. At a minimum, this team must include the

- governor;
- chief state school officer; and
- chairman and ranking member of education policy committees in the state legislature.

In addition, the following members are to be jointly selected by the governor and chief state school officer:

- a representative from an LEA eligible to receive a Reading First subgrant;
- the directors of federal and state programs with a strong reading component;
- a parent;
- a teacher and another instructional staff member; and
- a family literacy service provider.

The team may also include representatives from institutions of higher education, LEAs, adult education providers, professional development service providers, volunteer organizations and school or public libraries offering literacy programs.

The Reading and Literacy Partnership established by a state under the Reading Excellence Act[3] can serve as the Reading Leadership Team under the Reading First program. The Reading First application must describe how the Reading First program would expand, continue and/or modify current activities under the Reading Excellence Act.

Scientifically Based Reading Research

- applies rigorous, systematic, and objective procedures to obtain valid knowledge;
- employs systematic empirical methods that draw on observation and experiment;
- involves rigorous data analyses to test the stated hypotheses and justify the general conclusions drawn;
- relies on measurements or observational methods that provide valid and reliable data across evaluators, observers and multiple measurements and observations; and
- has been accepted by a peer-reviewed journal or approved by a panel of independent experts through a comparably rigorous, objective, and scientific review.

[No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, 20 U.S.C. §1208 (6)(A)-(B)(i-iv)]

[3] The Reading Excellence Act was part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act prior to the 2001 reauthorization.

Scientifically Based Reading Research

Research indicates that prevention of reading problems is significantly more cost efficient than remediation. Therefore, it is essential to implement effective reading instruction and programs (Doherty, 2002). The Reading First program emphasizes the necessity of scientifically based reading research (SBRR) to implement effective reading instruction and programs. SBRR must be the foundation of a state's Reading First program. (See box on previous page.)

High Quality Professional Development

States must have professional development activities relevant to reading instruction and coordinate these activities with other federal, state or locally funded activities. The Reading First program must ensure teachers can teach according to SBRR and effectively screen, identify and overcome reading barriers facing students. The professional development activities should have a supportive context with strong leadership, strong content grounded in research and an effective implementation process.

Assessment

Reading First requires the use of valid and reliable screening, diagnostic, progress monitoring and classroom-based reading assessments to ensure students receive appropriate reading instruction. An assessment committee formed as part of the Reading Leadership Academies is currently developing a list of assessments that meet specific criteria.

Reading Programs

Reading First requires implementation of reading programs with a coherent design in accord with SBRR. Programs should include explicit instructional strategies, coordinated instructional sequences, ample practice opportunities, aligned student materials, and an uninterrupted block of time (at least 90 minutes) each instructional day. Reading First allows for both *comprehensive* and *supplemental* programs. A comprehensive program includes the five core components of reading instruction. A supplemental program provides additional instruction in one or more areas of reading. Where supplemental programs are used, they must be coordinated with a core comprehensive program. Reading programs may also provide intervention by adding instruction for students performing below grade level. Every reading program must be selected according to the needs of the students.

All reading programs funded through Reading First must be based on SBRR and include the five essential components of reading instruction. (See box on this page.) These five components must be clearly identified and discussed in the state reading

Essential Components of Reading Instruction

Phonemic awareness – the ability to focus on and manipulate smallest units of sound in spoken language.

Phonics – the relationship between the letters of written language and the sounds of spoken language.

Vocabulary Development – the stored information about the meaning and pronunciation of words.

Reading fluency – the ability to read accurately, quickly and with expression.

Reading comprehension – the ability to understand or gain meaning from text.

plan and application for funds. It is important to remember that not every component receives equal emphasis at every stage of reading development.

Accountability

Reading First requires accountability for program effectiveness and improved reading achievement in K-3 students. While many states currently do not begin statewide accountability testing until the third grade, it is essential to implement reading program accountability measures prior to the third grade to ensure students receive appropriate reading instruction. A system of assessment needs to be in place to measure reading program outcomes. In addition, assessments can be used to monitor progress, to screen for children at risk of reading difficulty and to diagnose reading problems so that teachers may adjust instruction.

Leadership Roles

State departments of education can support the Reading First program through accountability, commitment, sharing, and leadership. Specifically, state education agencies (SEAs) can make relevant data available to help LEAs establish goals, select appropriate assessments and spotlight their successes. States can integrate funding sources to support implementation of scientifically based reading programs, provide information about scientifically based reading research and ensure that policies and actions support implementation of scientifically based reading programs, professional development and classroom-based assessment.

Special education providers must be involved in these nationwide efforts to improve reading skills. One way for special educators to be involved is to be an active part of the state Reading Leadership Team required by Reading First. A state's special education department can also take the lead in improving reading instruction and work with the general education field and institutions of higher education.

One State's Efforts - Pennsylvania

In Pennsylvania, the Governor's Institute for Educator Partnerships on Reading is conducted every summer. This week-long institute provides a structured training program for school building teams that includes the principal, speech and language clinicians, reading specialists, K-3 special educators and K-3 general educators. These teams works collaboratively to review curricula, professional development plans, and teacher induction plans to design appropriate reading instruction and programs for all students and ensure that professional development support exists for the teachers.

Staff from the Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network (PaTTAN), together with staff from the Comprehensive System of Personnel Development (CSPD) based at the intermediate unit, offer continued guided practice and on-site implementation with the reading team and school faculty. These staff members share information on reading programs, methods and models of instruction, and assist in the design of curricula and assessments. Statewide and regionally coordinated professional development events are also offered to strengthen efforts to improve reading instruction.

It is very important, according to Pennsylvania special education personnel, for special education to be involved in nationwide efforts such as Reading First to improve reading. Special educators and

speech/language pathologists can share strategies and skills with general educators to support the role of phonology in reading and strengthen reading instruction. Special education personnel can be active participants of the Reading Leadership team and can help identify areas of need.

For additional information about Pennsylvania's reading initiatives and Governor's Institute, please visit the website at http://www.PaTTAN.k12.pa.us

Early Reading First

Early Reading First is the second new initiative authorized by the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (under Title 1, Part B, Subpart 2). This nationwide program provides funds to LEAs and public or private organizations that serve children from low-income families such as Head Start, Even Start, Title I preschools, and child care agencies. Federal funds are awarded competitively to local programs to enhance young children's language and cognitive development by providing scientifically-based high quality, coherent, skill-based instruction and ongoing professional development. The purpose of Early Reading First is to prepare young children to enter kindergarten with the necessary language, cognitive, and early reading skills to ensure reading achievement and school success.

State departments of special education can support the Early Reading First program by sharing information about this new initiative and scientifically based pre-reading instruction and practices with the early childhood special education and early intervention communities.

The Early Reading First funding level for FY2002 is $75 million, with the range of awards from $250,000 to $1.5 million for a period not to exceed three years. Applications for the two-stage application process will become available May 17, 2002. Pre-applications are due June 21, 2002. Invitations for full applications will be distributed June 29, 2002 and full applications will be due September 15, 2002. An estimated 175 grants will be awarded in December 2002.

For additional information about the Early Reading First program, visit the website at http://www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/earlyreading

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http://www.nasdse.org/forum.htm

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[4] These resources are from the Reading Academy materials and Reading First website.

[5] Available free from ED Pubs at 1-877-4 ED-PUBS, # EXR0007 or online at: http://www.nifl.gov/nifl/partnershipforreading/publications/PFRbooklet.pdf

[6] Available free from ED Pubs # EXR0002P.

[7] Available free from ED Pubs # EXR0001P.

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